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Maryland Teacher Professional Development Standards Frequently Asked Questions

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1. Why do we need standards for teacher professional development?

Standards can serve a variety of important functions. First, they provide a clear vision and definition of high-quality professional development. Second, these standards and the related indicators can guide design, planning, implementation, and evaluation of professional development. These standards can also inform decisions about allocating resources for professional development, and they can support quality control and accountability systems.

2. Who articulated these professional development standards?

These standards were developed by the Maryland Teacher Professional Development Advisory Council, a 26-member group of distinguished K-16 educators, community leaders, and representatives from the business community. The State Superintendent of Schools convened the Council in January 2003 and charged the group with recommending a practical, policy-relevant definition of high-quality professional development. Following an extensive review of research on professional development, as well as numerous sets of standards set by other state departments of education, districts, local and regional reform initiatives, and professional associations, the Council articulated these standards for Maryland.

3. Did anyone else contribute to the development of the new professional development standards?

Yes. Members of the Council consistently sought the advice of their colleagues on early drafts of the standards and they brought the feedback to the Council meetings. In Spring 2004, after the Council had developed a set of draft standards, the State Superintendent of Schools directed staff in the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) to work with the Council to conduct a stakeholder engagement campaign. Overall, more than 70 focus groups met around the state to review the standards, provide feedback on them, and identify issues to be addressed as the standards are implemented. The final version of the standards reflects the feedback from the focus groups.

4. Don't we already have professional development standards?

In 1995, the Maryland State Board of Education adopted the standards for staff development of the National Staff Development Council (NSDC). Soon after the Board's action, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) began requiring that proposals for support for professional development discuss how the proposed activities met the NSDC standards. At about the same time, districts began adopting the standards for local professional development activities. Over time, adoption was uneven. Evidence suggests that there has been more attention to the NSDC framework focused on the context, content, and process of professional development and somewhat less attention to individual standards. In addition, full implementation and use of the NSDC standards were made more difficult by the absence of concrete indicators that explicitly reflect Maryland priorities for improving teaching and learning.

5. How are the new professional development standards aligned with other standards, such as those for the Professional Development Schools(PDS) and for Gifted and Talented Education?

All of these standards recognize the importance of high-quality professional development in efforts to improve instruction. Like the new professional development standards, the PDS standards underscore the importance of professional learning communities and the links between professional development and school and district priorities. The new professional development standards are more comprehensive than other standards because they focus on professional development for all teachers, regardless of their teaching assignments.

6. Why do the standards focus only on teacher professional development? Aren't they relevant for the professional development of other educators?

The State Superintendent of Schools was concerned about issues of teacher quality and the quality of professional development currently available to teachers. Therefore, she charged the Council with the tasks of reviewing current teacher professional development and articulating a definition of high-quality professional development that will meet the needs of all teachers. The standards could provide a starting point for defining high-quality professional development for other educators. However, it is beyond the scope of the Council's responsibility to tackle this issue. Other educators may decide to work with their professional associations, school districts, MSDE, and institutions of higher education to establish a mechanism for developing appropriate standards for their professional development.

7. What assumptions support the standards?

The standards rest on three assumptions. First, the standards assume that professional development takes many forms, including such things as teacher study groups, action research, collaboration on school and district improvement initiatives, coaching, and mentoring. In addition, professional development includes more traditional kinds of activities, such as workshops, graduate courses, and conferences and professional meetings.

The second assumption follows from the first. Because professional development includes such a broad range of activities, responsibility for professional development must be shared among many stakeholders.

The third assumption is that professional development is most effective when four contextual factors are in place. Effective professional development requires (1) vibrant learning communities that support and engage teachers as learners, (2) strong leaders who build and maintain support for professional development as a critical element in school improvement, (3) adequate resources, including people, money, and time and (4) consensus around clear expectations for teachers.

8. How are the standards organized?

The first six standards define the content of professional development. Specifically, the standards address (1) mastery of academic content aligned with Maryland standards and quality instruction, (2) using research to inform practice, (3) professional collaboration to improve instruction, (4) mastery of knowledge and skills to meet diverse learning needs, (5) teachers' skills in providing safe, secure and supportive learning environments for all students, and (6) mastery of skills necessary to communicate effectively with parents as partners in their children's learning. The next three standards concentrate on the processes of planning, organizing and designing professional development. These standards call for (1) examining disaggregated student data to determine the content, (2) using rigorous, ongoing evaluation to assess results for teachers and for students, and (3) incorporating best practices in adult learning into the design.

9. If a primary goal of teacher professional development is to improve instruction, shouldn't teachers play a major role in determining the content of professional development and the kinds of professional learning activities that will be available?

Absolutely! Teachers have critical roles to play in examining what all of their students know and are able to do, as well as the areas in which improvements are necessary. They also have critical roles in determining what they and their colleagues need to do to be more effective in helping students close the gaps between what they do know and what they are expected to know. At the same time, school leaders, district staff, parents, and providers have important perspectives on how to improve instruction and what teachers

need to know to be active participants in the process. The notion of shared responsibility suggests that all of these voices should be heard in discussions about teacher professional development.

10. Does the Council expect that all professional development activities will meet all of the standards all of the time?

As noted above, the standards provide a framework for planning and implementing high-quality professional development. The Council expects that state or local professional development portfolios will reflect all of the standards. The Council also anticipates that individual professional development activities will address the three process standards and at least one of the content standards.

11. The new professional development standards present an ambitious vision of professional development. Are there sufficient capacity and resources to bring this vision to reality?

There is much to be learned about this issue. Increased attention to many forms of school-based, job-embedded professional development, including the deployment of staff to these activities is a promising example of improving professional development and re-allocating resources. Myriad partnerships between districts and institutions of higher education reflect commitments to share responsibility for professional development and can represent frameworks for more efficient utilization of resources. At the same time, districts, institutions of higher education, and MSDE may lack the expertise, time, and money to conduct rigorous evaluations of professional development to determine its full impact. District staff, teachers, and principals all struggle to find time for sustained, high-quality professional development and professional development may not always be carefully aligned with reform priorities or designed to meet teachers' professional learning needs.

12. How will these issues be addressed?

The Council has made a set of recommendations for implementing the standards. The recommendations focus on specific steps that MSDE, districts, institutions of higher education, and other stakeholders can take to become more familiar with the standards and to begin using them to guide new professional development activities. The Council's report, *Helping Teachers Help Students: The Imperative for High-Quality Professional Development*, will be available in December 2004 on MSDE's websites: <http://mdk12.org> and <http://marylandpublicschools.org>. MSDE is providing additional support for implementing the standards by sponsoring the development of an online quality assurance guide. This guide, which is expected to be available in March, 2005, will provide step-by-step suggestions for designing professional development activities that meet the standards. In addition to helping with basic design considerations, this guide will help formulate evaluation plans and cost estimates.

13. Can we expect that MSDE will adopt and implement the new standards?

Yes.

14. *What are some examples of how the new standards could be reflected in MSDE programs and working relationships with districts?*

There are a number of ways that the standards could shape MSDE programs. Staff can use the standards to plan professional development that MSDE provides. Staff can use the standards to plan and support rigorous evaluations of professional development. Staff can use the standards to guide preparation of Requests for Proposals and rubrics for reviewing proposals and plans. Staff can use the standards to make decisions about approving courses and other activities that generate continuing professional development credits. Staff and leaders can use the standards inform decisions about resource allocations and in working with districts to review progress on implementing master plans.

15. Will districts and providers, such as institutions of higher education, be required to adopt and implement the new standards?

Not currently, although they are strongly encouraged to do so. The new standards do not represent a mandate nor are they expected to be a new initiative or to impose a separate set of requirements on districts or institutions of higher education. Instead, they are expected to provide a common framework and a blueprint for planning, implementation, and evaluating professional development as a critical component of school improvement.